

# Just what is intersectionality – and what does it mean from an Irish perspective?

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'The Irish language, literature and cultural industries have been - and continue to be - shaped by these intersectional lines'. Photo: Getty Images

## **Opinion: our history means Ireland has specific things to say about relationships between race, class, disability, gender and sex**

What is this 'intersectionality' I keep hearing about, you ask? It names the effects of relationships between race, class, gender, sexuality and disability. Ireland has specific things to say about relationships between race, class, disability, gender and sex. We would be well served to think about these now, as media discourses around migration in Ireland demonise increasing diversity. An intersectional perspective suggests that Ireland has always been diverse, but the select stories we have told have silenced much of this diversity.

Did you know that the bodies that were exhumed from Newgrange have been [identified](#) through DNA as coming from Anatolia: the country now known as Türkiye? Histories of non-white, differently abled, traveller, queer people and women in Ireland are still just beginning to be told. The Irish perspective has more reason to oppose race and racism than anyone looking at the current protests about immigration might imagine.

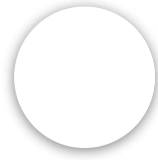


Newgrange DNA

***From RTÉ Radio 1's Drivetime, Philip Boucher-Hayes reports on DNA research conducted on the bones of a man buried in the 5,000-year-old Newgrange passage tomb***

Most people schooled in Ireland know that the [Spanish Armada's](#) impact on Ireland was an indirect consequence of the failed Spanish invasion of England in 1588. The Armada's defeat had unintended consequences for Ireland. Spanish ships were scattered and wrecked along the west coast. Survivors were largely Catholic, and they interacted with the predominantly Catholic Irish.

This interaction contributed to the strengthening of Catholicism in Ireland during a time when it was under pressure from Protestant rule. Spanish survivors of the Armada [sought the support](#) of Irish chieftains in their struggle against English rule. This is an early story of Ireland welcoming non white migrants and working together with them. Surely we can do this again.



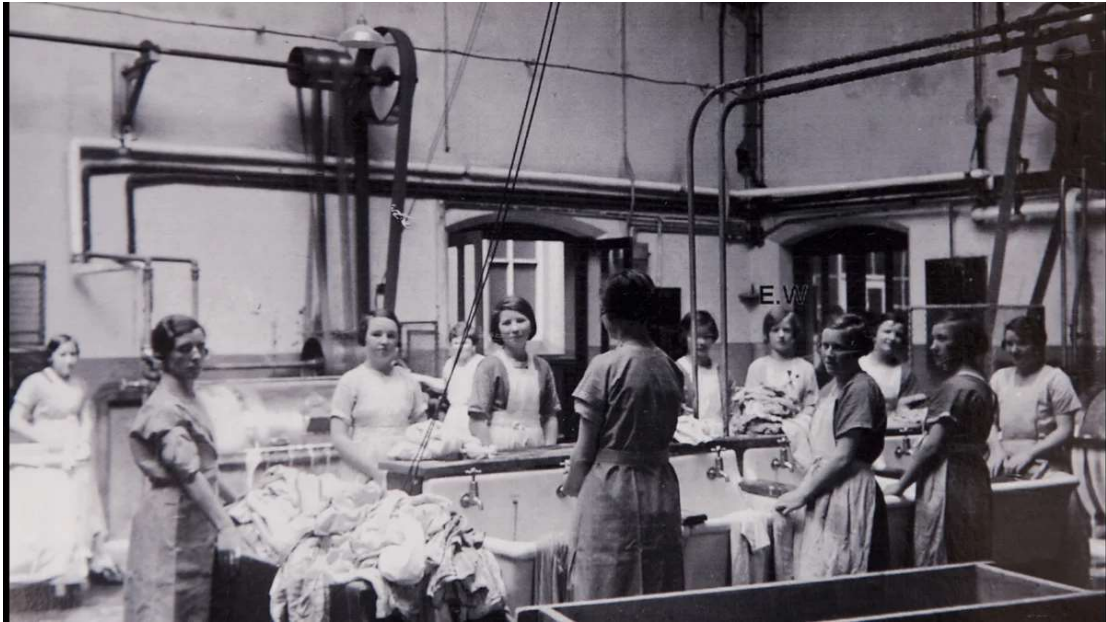
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***From RTÉ Archives, Jim Fahy reports for RTÉ News in 1988 on the commemoration of 300 Spaniards who survived the Spanish Armada shipwrecks but were executed in Galway***

There are also histories of disability in Ireland not well known. Thinking more carefully about them might ensure the darker parts of our history do not repeat. While the primary focus of the [Magdalene laundries](#) was on women and girls, the treatment of infants with disabilities born to women in these institutions was [harsh and neglectful](#). Babies born with disabilities in these institutions received minimal medical care or attention. Due to poor living conditions and lack of proper medical care, the mortality rates among infants, including those with disabilities, were higher in the Magdalene laundries than in the general population.

Disabled babies did not survive infancy. The few that did survive were institutionalized in specialized facilities or hospitals, but the quality of care in these institutions could vary widely. A significant challenge in understanding the fate of babies with disabilities born in Magdalene laundries is the lack of records and transparency surrounding the operations of these institutions. Most records were lost, destroyed, or deliberately concealed, making it difficult for survivors and researchers to trace the fates of these infants.

It's important to note that the treatment of infants with disabilities in Magdalene laundries was part of a broader pattern of neglect, exploitation, and mistreatment of vulnerable individuals within these institutions. We must remain mindful not to create new versions of such punishing spaces, like, for example, the inhumane spaces of direct provision.



Galway Magdalene Laundry

***From RTÉ Radio 1's Drivetime in 2020, Lorna Siggins reports on the transformation of a former Magdalene laundry convent in Galway into a refuge for women and children***

The thing that suggests to me that Ireland has the capacity to care about complex human experiences and, in simple terms, to do better in accommodating them, is its history of negotiating the 'dirty' whiteness of Irish ethnicity, as constructed through Colonial rule, and generations of oppression caused by colonisation. These stories are well documented. The derogatory term "dirty Irish" has been historically used as a negative stereotype by English speakers to demean or denigrate the Irish people. This stereotype is rooted in a complex history of relations between Ireland and England, characterized by colonialism, discrimination and social hierarchies.

From the late 12th century on, the Irish have been portrayed as inferior to the English, and this perception was used to justify English rule and domination. Ireland's experience of enforced poverty and economic hardship, alongside the English portrayal of the Irish as lazy or unclean, despite the systemic inequalities and discrimination they faced, means that we know what it's like to be treated badly, to be maligned, and made 'lesser than'.

***The negative stereotypes about the 'dirty Irish' have shown us it's crucial to treat people from all backgrounds with respect and fairness***

So given this, how can we as a nation treat others as 'lesser than', in good faith? We know Irish people have a rich cultural heritage, and this is constructed with migrants from across the globe, but it has allowed the voices of the most marginal and vulnerable to be silenced at times. The

negative stereotypes about the dirty Irish have no basis in reality, but they have shown us it's crucial to treat people from all backgrounds with respect and fairness, recognizing that stereotypes perpetuate harmful biases and prejudices.

The Irish language, literature and cultural industries have been - and continue to be - shaped by these intersectional lines. Developing a better understanding of the intersectional nature of this will facilitate a more voluptuous national imaginary of intersectional Irish presents.

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**The views expressed here are those of the author and do not represent or reflect the views of RTÉ**

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